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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000170

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MARR](#) [ASEC](#) [FJ](#)  
SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 3/19/07: FIJI SPIN ON MINISTERIAL;  
MORE CLEAN-UP RHETORIC; ACKNOWLEDGING HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES;  
PUBLIC-SERVICE STRIKE?

REF: 06 SUVA 519

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D)

#### Summary

1. (C) Fiji's interim government is spinning the Forum Ministerial last week as a success and is leaving a distinct impression it does not intend early elections. Commodore Bainimarama's "clean up" rhetoric continues, though we predict at some point real evidence will be necessary. Bainimarama told an interviewer last weekend that an attempt by three diplomats to incite an RFMF mutiny last November forced the coup. Bainimarama publicly acknowledged that RFMF human-rights abuses are a major concern, but they are not intentional. The military has reconfirmed PM Qarase should not expect freedom of movement anytime soon. Remittances are flowing in from abroad to cushion lives in Fiji affected by the coup. Public-service unions continue preparations for a possible strike that the military has made clear will not be allowed to happen. End summary.

#### Interim Government spins Forum Vanuatu meeting

2. (U) Fiji interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau issued a media statement late on March 19 saying the interim government welcomed the outcome of the Forum Ministerial Meeting in Vanuatu. Nailatikau said the Vanuatu meeting showed "acceptance by the Forum of the interim government and its pivotal role to take Fiji to sustained parliamentary democracy. So the door has not been shut on us." Nailatikau suggested a proposed working group would provide necessary information to the Forum on why the interim government was saying that elections could only be held after three years. Nailatikau said the interim government is committed to holding elections sooner rather than later, "as long as the requirements of holding a free, fair, legally constituted and properly held election are met." Nailatikau noted the Forum's offer of a phased package of financial and technical support to Fiji, including for the electoral process and for a credible anti-corruption commission. We hear Nailatikau told the Forum Ministers that Fiji will need F\$53 million (US\$32 million) in donor assistance to prepare for and conduct an appropriate election, an eye-popping figure that reportedly brought amazed comment once the Fijians left the room.

#### Comment

3. (C) The interim government is spinning as fast as it can to cast the best light on the Vanuatu meeting, accenting

engagement, suggesting the working group can be the occasion for the Forum to see the light on an election scenario longer than two years, spreading through the rumor mill a note that the Forum communique does not mention explicitly the "Bainimarama back to the barracks" theme, welcoming offers of aid without highlighting the strings attached, etc. The Fiji media seem to have taken their cue, offering up quite a few soft headlines. International statements, like that of the U.S., that emphasize the Ministers' wholesale endorsement of the Eminent Persons Group themes, remain important to providing the Fiji public a balanced perspective. End comment.

More clean-up rhetoric and a swipe at the NZ PM

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14. (C) Commodore Bainimarama told the media on March 18 that a preliminary, partial report on an audit of the May 2006 general elections indicates the interim government should ask the judiciary to declare those elections null and void. Bainimarama said the interim government has accumulated a huge body of evidence awaiting the formal creation within the next few weeks of an Anti-Corruption Commission which will take cases to the regular courts. Bainimarama suggested the process should convince critics, including Australia and New Zealand, of the reality that the change of government was not a coup but an essential clean-up campaign. Bainimarama accused NZ PM Clarke of "a personal vendetta," which has motivated an equivalent response.

Comment

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15. (C) At some point, the interim government will need to move beyond rhetoric to hard facts regarding its evidence of

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corruption. A savvy observer who recently visited the anti-corruption unit offices noted that the current team consists of only about ten people. They make well-publicized raids on offices and grab loads of files, with no due process involved; but it is not at all clear that anyone is doing any real digging into whatever has been seized. Of course, the tainted evidence, obtained without warrants, would presumably not be welcomed in a neutrally constituted court of law. It remains to be seen how judicial Fiji's courts will be in the current environment. End comment.

Bainimarama claims ambassadors forced him to coup

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16. (C) When asked by a New Zealand newspaper what ultimately led to removal of the Qarase government, Bainimarama reportedly said: "My hand was forced. In November when I was in New Zealand, three high commissioners and ambassadors went up to the camp to convince my troops and senior officers to stop following my orders - they were inciting mutiny. If they were successful, we would be fighting one another in the camp. But my troops know what action they must take. They warned me immediately." (Note: See reftel report of the meeting at the camp. All three diplomats were under instructions to discourage a coup, not to foment a mutiny. By that late November date, there was no doubt of Bainimarama's intention.)

Human rights abuses happen, but not by design

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17. (U) In a media interview, March 18, Bainimarama reportedly acknowledged there have been cases of RFMF human-rights abuses, and he said that has been a major concern to him. He is quoted as saying: "We need to get rid of the human rights abuse by telling soldiers to follow human rights processes correctly. Our troops don't go out to do that intentionally. It's just that some of them think that's the way." Bainimarama reportedly dismissed suggestions he lacks control over his troops, saying he spends much time emphasizing not to abuse power.

No Qarase travel anytime soon

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¶18. (U) RFMF spokesman Leweni told the media March 19 that travel restrictions on PM Qarase are not likely to be lifted anytime soon. Qarase has sought permission to travel to Suva to tend to legal matters, including his lawsuit against the coup perpetrators. Qarase's public suggestion last week that ethnic-Fijians might still rise up against the interim government accented the RFMF's desire to keep him isolated on his home island in Lau.

Remittances in time of need  
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¶19. (U) The head of the WestPac Bank in Fiji, David Evans, says remittances from abroad have surged in the three months since the coup. He estimates the current flow would be about F\$400 million (US\$240 million) per year. The presumed explanation is expatriates attempting to support families, especially those whose family members have lost jobs in recent months. Evans noted disappointment that those receiving the money are heading out to spend it on consumer goods rather than investing for the longer term.

Injecting a dose of military into the civil service  
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¶10. (U) RFMF Deputy Commander Capt. (N) Teleni has acknowledged that some officers are receiving short-term training preparatory to being seconded to government departments. Teleni admitted that some civil servants have been reluctant to cooperate with the interim government.

Still rumblings about public service strike  
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¶11. (U) Public-sector unions continue preparations for strike action, despite a plea from Commodore Bainimarama to put the country first. Several unions have undertaken pre-strike ballots, with the results reportedly demonstrating overwhelming support for industrial action. Bainimarama and Teleni have warned that the RFMF has contingency plans in place to keep strikes from happening, since the interim government's emergency decree bans such activity if it threatens security.

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